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AUTHOR Elliott, Sharon
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ABSTRACT

The possible benefits of experience in a family-centered elementary school for the student of early childhood education are explored. The proposed school site would be in the inner city where parents are coping with many problems as they raise their young children. It is suggested that the training student, working with other public servants, would learn to deal with the multifaceted problems facing the families of their pupils. This holistic view of the child would enable the teacher to more fully understand learning and behavior problems. (JD)

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SHARON ELLIOTT, Ed. D.
Associate Professor, College of Education
Director, Wayne State University
Nursery School at Jeffries Homes
299 Education Building
Wayne State University
Detroit, Michigan, 48202
(313) 577-1686

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## Understanding Parents: An Important Element in Early Childhood Teacher Education

When asked what skills an early childhood teacher must have in order to be a professional, more than one person will respond, "A lot of patience and love for little children." This limited view of teaching young children is often shared by college students who contemplate entering the teaching field. They think that perhaps work with young children might be a safe as well as an enjoyable career. And if all else fails they are at least bigger than the children. It is a surprise to many to learn that early childhood education is a complex process where students must develop the skills of working with parents in addition to planning and following through on a comprehensive program for young children.

Increasingly early childhood teachers find themselves involved in their pupils' family life, its struggles, its joys and its problems. Teachers are in this position for several reasons. One has to do with the age of the children and the development of the parents. Having one or more children of preschool or kindergarten age can be overwhelming. Another reason has to do with the pressure felt by parents to raise good, bright, competent children. In times commonly viewed as troubled, unsafe and unsure, raising children can be tremendously difficult.

Is it possible to prepare teachers-in-training, many

of whom are in their early 20's to deal with the complex results of poverty, racism, and violence exhibited by so many young children and their families? Many of these college students are just beginning to examine their own values and backgrounds, leave the protection of their families and reflect on "Who am I? Where am I going?" Adult maturing is a long and effortful process and even more complex for those young people who are preparing for service careers. "Seldom are teachers able to analyze their own values and those of the families they serve. Yet family lifestyles of today are so vastly different for the children within any classroom that it is critical to accept ways of behaving that might have been rejected in the classroom of a few years ago" [1]. It is imperative that the University help its students in early childhood education set the highest standards for themselves as professionals and at the same time understand the reality of frustrations faced daily by the people with whom they will be working.

The last decade has seen the demise of the traditional types of laboratory schools on university campuses. These schools played an important role in providing information on normal growth and development. They demonstrated for students the components of a quality education program. However, in addition to their high cost, many of the programs were accused of being too pure, too protected, too far removed from the public schools in building size, equipment and supplies, and problems brought by children and their families.

With bussing now a regular part of most school systems and declining enrollments resulting in empty classrooms, a new opportunity is occurring for school systems and colleges of education to consider variations of the laboratory school concept, one of which is a family-centered school. Both institutions recognize the need to provide quality pre and inservice training programs which will educate students to understand and work with families in realistic school environments. However several conditions have to be controlled in order for students to have laboratory situations for study and practice which sample the composition of public school classrooms and yet retain a family-centered focus.

This proposed family-centered school should be located away from the university. It belongs in the community, in housing projects, in neighborhood centers where it can become a viable part of the community, where it can demonstrate to the community its concern for that community, the skills it has to offer, and its recognition of the skills of that community. Thus students will have built into their training a sense of responsibility, commitment and appreciation for the neighborhood in which the school is located.

The family-centered school will have a balance of socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds. Children with special needs will be mainstreamed into the total program, not just on a token basis. It is from working with a variety of people that most students learn to value the differences in people, learn to go beyond their own backgrounds. The U.S. Office of Education's Study Commission on Undergraduate Education the Education of

Teachers discusses the changing role of teachers within a community...

> ...they may often be street workers; they may offer a variety of medical and community health services; they may assist in developing intellectual and emotional growth in both children and parents; they will, as school-related personnel, relate to other human service agencies and civil agencies; and they will work to create a healthy professional community within the school and assist the community around it in organizing and developing its resources [2]

Important elements in the proposed family-centered school would be varying types of children and families to include stable, concerned family units as well as family units whose personal and everyday problems make parenting an overwhelming task. Students must have in-depth training and experience in learning to analyze and build upon the strengths and needs these families bring with them to the center. And in order to do this they must be under the supervision of professional, concerned teachers and school staff working in partnership with the families for the good of the child.

Gradually in this school students will learn to work with the alcoholic and drug addicted parents who love their children, but consistently put their own needs first. They will encounter an increasing number of young teenage parents who often are still children themselves and yet must be helped to develop their parenting skills, to find family planning centers and to plan for their personal futures without sacrificing their young children. Students will meet parents who themselves did poorly in school, want better for their children and need now to be respected, wanted and assisted by the schools that denigrated them in their earlier years. Students will meet families of children with special needs and come to understand the skills these families

have for coping and at the same time the drain on family life. Students will work also with parents who are doing an effective job of parenting, whose children demonstrate what love, stability and stimulation do for a child and who have potential for helping others in difficulty.

As the students meet, work and struggle with each of the above family units, they will begin to understand the effect of economic and social pressures on the family. They will begin to understand how little power many parents really have and how much control institutions and agencies have over the total functioning of the family unit. Keniston likens the role of parents into the 70's to that of coordinators, but coordinators without much power [3].

Omawke speaks of the implications for teacher education saying there needs to be an emphasis on family development and its impact on individuals [4]. Students must learn to identify and support changing family patterns. One method of evaluation, assessment and planning is the staffing of a case similar to what is done in clinics and hospitals. The college students meet on a regular basis with the supervising teacher, the social worker, the pyschologist, the nutrionist, the speech therapist, the nurse to review program for children and program for parents. What is happening at home? How is this affecting the child? What programs can be planned? Agreements can be reached on strategies, as the team examines and builds on the family's strengths and needs.

Students need to understand that Mrs. Smith's anxiety over her decision to have an abortion is being reflected in George's aggressive acting out just when staff thought that they had made some progress with the child. They need to understand that for the widowed Mrs. Brown's fourth stay in the hospital in a year, the fact that the school is helping to make arrangements to insure her daughter will not miss any school is a relief to the mother and a benefit to the child and the school. They need to see that the fact the school can call upon Mr. and Mrs. Hernandez to assist in establishing a bi-lingual preschool program insures an honest response to some tentative ideas by the school.

It is this in-depth field training, examination of ideas strategies and approaches that is currently not possible to do in most public schools because of the pupil and family case loads of teachers and support staff. In a family-centered laboratory school planning and consulting time and availability of staff is built into staff load. Granted this may occur very seldom once students are in the public school. Nevertheless it becomes a goal for each to strive for, a professional commitment. It helps develop interdisciplinary skills for analyzing children. It prevents students from developing the habit of looking at class behavior as a total phenomenon and then labelling the child, often negatively. It furthers the development of the professional.

## Footnotes

1. Butler, Annie, "Today's Child - Tomorrow's World", Young Children, Vol. 32, No. 1, November 1976 p. 7.

2. Study Commission on Undergraduate Education and the Education of Teachers, Teacher Education In The United States: The Responsibility Gap. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1976, p. 3.

3. Keniston, Kenneth. All Our Children: The American Family Under Pressure, N.Y. Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1977, p. 18.

4. Omawke, Eveline, "What Children and Parents are Expecting from Teacher Education", Teacher Education: of the teacher, by the teacher, for the child, Editor, Bernard Spodek, Washington D.C. National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1974, p. 76.

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